

Wrestling Perspective

- Analysis & Commentary From The McLaughlin Group of Professional Wrestling •

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The Worst Talent To Waste Is Your Own

By - Paul MacArthur

After wrestling his last main event for the Global Wrestling Federation, Eddie Gilbert, booker and lead wrestler, seized the house microphone and directed a child-like temper tantrum towards chief GWF financier, Max Andrews. Following Gilbert's public display, Andrews reportedly approached him, only to be greeted by another verbal assault. Andrews left the building and will continue to run the GWF, though its chances of success are limited. Gilbert left the promotion and added a burned bridge to his growing collection.

Gilbert's decision to publicly showcase his emotions made for great newsletter copy. To some it was entertaining. To many, it reflected their own feelings about the current state of the professional wrestling industry. Yet, for Gilbert, it represented more than that: it once again proved that despite his talent, he is largely responsible for his lack of career development. Over the years, Gilbert has been his own worst enemy. Immensely talented and creative, he was cursed with a physique considered unmarketable by today's wrestling hierarchy. His stature, however, has been by no means his most insurmountable obstacle. Indeed, the issue of size is hardly comparable to Gilbert's other major drawback: his temper.

On numerous occasions, Gilbert has allowed his temper to block his judgement and, resultantly, his success. His departure from the CWF booker position in 1988 was the beginning of a three year cyclical pattern of unreliability, poor temperament and, in some cases, dishonesty. Upon departing the CWF in 1988, he joined the NWA and enjoyed some moderate success as a mid-card performer until the fall of 1989. After what Gilbert termed a falling out with then booker Ric Flair, he found his career taking a downward spin and slowly became a designated jobber. Given his ability, the situation appeared politically motivated, but when the similar situation occurred with Mike Rotunda, a wrestler of equal talent, few mentioned politics.

In February 1990, Gilbert had the option to leave the promotion or re-sign a six figure contract. Despite what was happening to his career, Gilbert chose to re-sign with the NWA. No one forced his hand. The choice was his. To no one's surprise, his career continued in the same direction. Frustrated, and in the middle of a divorce, Gilbert claimed he was injured and took some time off. That injury was considered questionable at best. While on injured reserve, he consented to interviews with *Pro Wrestling Torch* and *Matwatch*. To this day, many consider these interviews ploys to get released from a contract and situation he was dissatisfied with, as he repeatedly berated NWA management, and former booker/World Champion, Ric Flair. Days after the *Pro Wrestling Torch* interview, Gilbert was released from his contract. Only a few weeks later, he would appear in USWA rings, wrestling as if he was never injured at all.

Gilbert's return to Memphis was lauded by the wrestling press, *Wrestling Perspective* included, who viewed his return as a shot in the arm for the USWA. Indeed, it was. Between running a universally praised tournament, crowning Terry Funk as the USWA World Champion and attempting a vehicular homicide on Jerry Lawler, Gilbert proved, once again, he possessed one of the business' most creative minds. He also continued to wrestle with his alleged injuries, despite numerous assertions that he would retire from active wrestling. Gilbert's tenure in the USWA demonstrated either commendable commitment to wrestle injured for the sake of the promotion or sheer dishonesty in his negotiations with the NWA. To this day, Gilbert's track record strongly suggests the later.

As expected, Gilbert did not last long in the USWA. In what seemed like a repeat of 1988, as he would soon have a falling out with Lawler. Knowing that the only man who would be king in Memphis was Lawler, Gilbert left the USWA booking position and wrestled independent dates, starting his legendary series with Cactus Jack. He also negotiated with Joe Pedicino, as Pedicino attempted to start the GWF. The Global Wrestling Federation experienced several delays and Gilbert was characteristically vocal about the situation. He lambasted Pedicino in an interview with *Cassette Wrestling News*, yet, within six months he would be working for Pedicino as GWF booker. Once again, his talent compensated for his temperament, but the pattern was getting tired.

During his term as GWF booker, Gilbert developed numerous creative angles, gave entertaining matches and provided an interesting alternative product. After a series of fantastic matches with Cactus Jack, WCW showed renewed interest in Gilbert and his bump artist colleague. Cactus Jack would sign, but Gilbert, feeling it wasn't in his best interest to enter WCW as a babyface, did not. Then after the suspension of Paul E. Dangerously, Gilbert would publicly denounce Jim Herd, WCW and reduce his chances of entering the promotion.

Over the next few months, nothing Gilbert did elevated GWF attendance to profitable levels. After several months of losing money, the GWF has become a Texas promotion and no longer will pay transportation costs for wrestlers living out of the area. Gilbert, an Atlanta resident, was removed as booker and on April 24, the aforementioned public confrontation with Andrews occurred. It is easy to understand Gilbert's anger and frustration. He attempted to create a unique promotion during one of the toughest economic situations wrestling has ever witnessed. His efforts were praised by many, but few bought tickets. For all the creativity he put into the promotion, it failed to draw at the box office. Perhaps it needed more time, and given its current direction, the GWF will most assuredly be little more than a small time Texas promotion. But the fact is, they were headed in that direction with Gilbert at the helm.

Gilbert is a talented individual. His booking ideas are some of the most ingenious in the business. He is a solid wrestler and performer. His interviews are entertaining and he is particularly adept at getting across a heel persona. Still, despite his numerable talents, he has continually found his success thwarted. In many cases it was the result of politics, inept management and clashing egos. In others, it was Gilbert's temper. If Gilbert has been honest when interviewed by the wrestling press, he is to be respected for his integrity and commitment to say what he believes, regardless of the potential ramifications. However, the evidence would indicate he has, at times, been less than forthright and allowed his temper to obscure his judgement and honesty.

By most accounts, those who have met Gilbert will confirm his talent and creativity. Many will say he is a gentleman, one who wishes the business would return to the popularity it once enjoyed. Yet, like most talented people, he has a temper and it has hindered his career. As long as Gilbert is a slave to his temper, the pattern will continue. One does not forge ahead in the world by denigrating former employers and current colleagues. Such people are thought to be untrustworthy. They are perceived as people who will sacrifice

the company for their own career. However pleasant and gracious Gilbert may be, and despite his best intentions, he has earned this reputation over the past three years .

Professional wrestling is, and always will be, political in nature. Those who rise to the top do not necessarily do so because of drawing ability or talent. A man's reputation precedes him in this business. His reliability and commitment are important, as is what he will do to and how he will interact with management. Gilbert has found himself in the unenviable position of being perceived as a talented individual whose temper is beginning to outweigh his abilities. Gilbert has time to repair that image. He has the opportunity to start fresh with a regional promotion, or maybe one more chance with WCW. But unless Gilbert learns from his past mistakes, the results will be the same, just expedited. It's time Gilbert put his creative energies and talent to use in a long-term constructive fashion. It's time Gilbert realized that, if he continues his predictable pattern, the business will grow tired of him, despite his talent. It's time Gilbert realizes his potential, without alienating those around him. It's time for Gilbert to make a difference. He has the potential. Does he have the discipline?

An Interview With Ivan Koloff

During his 30 year wrestling career, Ivan Koloff held the WWF Heavyweight championship, the NWA World Tag Team belts and countless other titles. Koloff, who has wrestled for nearly every promotion during the past three decades, is one of the most famous heels of the modern day era. Koloff shocked a full house at Madison Square Garden and thousands of other wrestling fans on January 18, 1971 when he defeated Bruno Sammartino for the WWWF title. In this interview conducted by David Skolnick on March 19, 1992, Koloff discussed his career, his thoughts on the business and his wrestling school.

Wrestling Perspective: Why don't we start with how you became a wrestler.

Ivan Koloff: I can remember back to the mid fifties. I remember I started watching wrestling when I first came into Canada as a youngster being adopted. I was raised in Canada. I was introduced to wrestling through television. I think I fell in love right away. It was just something I could see myself doing. I come from a family of 10 children, seven brothers. I was always wrestling around and I could always beat them. I figured it was something I was naturally made for. So I just pursued it from that point on and when I became a teenager, I left the farm and went into the city and I found the British Empire champion, a man by the name of Jack Wentworth. Also, my great uncle was a professional wrestler, Dan Koloff. They taught me the ropes. It took me several years before I broke out of the amateur ranks. But I pursued it in the mid-sixties and became fairly well known by about '68.

WP: Where was the first region you worked?

IK: Montreal area, about '68.

WP: From there?

IK: In the Pittsburgh area, around that area for several months. New York got wind of me and took a look at me. They brought me in there. I wrestled there for one year, about late '69 and '70. I had a trip to Australia for 10 weeks. Got a rematch as soon as I got back from Australia with Sammartino and that's when I won the title: the World Wrestling Federation title.

WP: How did you get the Russian gimmick? Where did that come from?

IK: It's hereditary. My great uncle was a wrestler and even though I was raised in Canada, I was very proud of the fact that of my line of blood that came from the old country, so I just figured it was a thing to capitalize on. Whenever that pride is deep in you, it was just natural to follow in the tradition of the Koloff name.

WP: You worked for McMahon, left for Australia and came back in to do the title change. First of all, what's it like wrestling in the Garden in front of 20,000 people?

IK: It was tremendous. The idea was the people were taken by surprise. The shock of it. They never believed that Sammartino would be defeated because I had wrestled him several times before around Pittsburgh and even in New York the year previous to this. They figured, even though it was sold out and there was a lot of interest in it; talking to people now about it, they just didn't really believe that Sammartino would lose. It was a big surprise. Obviously by the expression afterwards, there was complete silence, followed with the announcement that I had just won the title. A lot of people were upset.

WP: Unlike when a heel wins a main event and everyone goes crazy, there was just amazement and complete silence.

IK: Complete silence. As a matter of fact, they were too afraid to even raise my hand at the time. I wanted the referee to raise my hand and give me the belt and he said, "No. You go back to the dressing room." They were afraid of a riot.

WP: Moving on to Pedro Morales, who caused a few riots in the seventies. You dropped it to him.

IK: Three weeks later at the Garden. The next show they had at the Garden. You could tell with the Puerto Rican support that Morales definitely had the advantage that night. I don't think I would have gotten out of there alive if I would have defeated him.

WP: How long were you with McMahon?

IK: After that, I left not too long after that, about a month later. Maybe two months later. I pursued going to Minneapolis, AWA area, and wrestled there for about two and half years.

WP: What was it like working for Vince McMahon Sr.?

IK: Very good. I got along well with him. He was the type of man you could sit down and talk to. He always had a hello for you, shook your hand. He was quite a bit different than his son, although I got along with Vince Jr. very well. He was a commentator at the time. He was always nice with me. But I understand that he changed his policies a lot as far as promotions when he took over.

WP: You can see noticeable differences in the way he promotes?

IK: Yes. I never wrestled for him. Not that I had tried. I imagine he would have took me after that. But I felt at that time I was down in the Charlotte area with my family and the kids were growing up and I wanted to stay a little bit closer.

WP: I do remember seeing you at the Garden around 1983 against (Bob) Backlund.

IK: That was the last time I was there.

WP: You said earlier that you went to work for Verne Gagne after that.

IK: Actually, it was after I left the first time I went to Gagne in 1971 after I lost the title. I went in until about '74. That's when I started in the NWA, Charlotte area.

WP: Who did you work with in Gagne's promotion?

IK: Billy Robinson a lot, Crusher, Brusier. Lot of tag teams with Superstar Billy Graham. Wahoo McDaniel, Verne Gagne himself. Quite a few people.

WP: A lot of legends.

IK: Yes. It used to be quite a bit different than it is now. They were after the revenues of the arena at that time and usually they were always full.

WP: At this point, it's more of a pay-per-view emphasis. Do you think that's hurt the business?

IK: Well, it's a change. Anytime you have a change, it definitely affects it because the formats being changed to the promoters going after the revenues of pay-per-view specials and TV, they're concentrating on the big money there. I think the biggest thing that has changed is we were always paid on the revenue of attendance at buildings. Now it's changed to a more salary type of situation.

WP: Do you think that makes people work not as hard as they used to?

IK: The incentive, I don't believe, is there as much. Although a guy probably works harder to get to that spot or get himself worked up to where he's a main eventer. But I think once he's at that point and he gets a contract like in TBS, down with Ted Turner, he's got a contract for a year, three years, five years, whatever it may be for x amount of dollars. To me, the extra incentive is not there to go out and produce as much as before.

WP: Do you believe that's hurt arena attendance?

IK: Yes. The big thing that has hurt I believe is these large promotions going after talent that is just because of their size, more than their knowledge or their skill. They just want someone whose marketable as far as toys.

WP: I know when you first broke in you had quite a different physique than you do now or have had in the past 10 years or so. Why did you change so dramatically in size? You were very stocky when you faced Sammartino.

IK: I was about 300 pounds at that time. I believe due to the amount of years and injuries, it's the type of thing that as you get older, you start to cut back and lose body weight. You can move better. The injuries slow you down because you're carrying that extra weight. You're definitely at a disadvantage. I went down to less than 220 right now from 300. I think I've been able to keep doing it.

WP: You hear a lot about steroids in wrestling. Have you ever used them yourself?

IK: You know at one time, to be honest with you, I tried what they call dyanabol. A little tablet, five milligrams. For two weeks I experimented with it because I did have an injury, a back injury. I thought it might help me. But what I did notice is I put on 20 pounds of bodyweight and increased my weight lifting about 20 pounds on the bench press for example. Of course the extra size, body weight would account for the extra strength. But it just scared me. I just said, "That's not natural, not normal." It's something I'm going to have side effects from this, so I never took anymore.

WP: This was how long ago?

IK: This was in the early seventies.

WP: You said you worked with Billy Graham around that time. Did you know he was on steroids?

IK: Oh yes. It's pretty enticing when you get a guy who looks like Superstar Billy Graham. At that time, there was nobody equal to him. He had 22 inch biceps, a little waist and he was an impressive looking man. Whenever young guys starting off in wrestling look at that, they said, "Oh." That's the thing that's prevalent in football, any sports that require a lot of size and strength. It encourages them to take it. I'm very happy and very glad that I didn't stick to it and continue taking it. The side effects now, I definitely wouldn't be wrestling.

WP: Getting back to your career, I know you worked many years for the NWA, the Crocketts. What was it like working for Jim Crockett and Dusty (Rhodes)?

IK: Dusty is a very knowledgeable man as far as matches, match making, putting talent together to compete against each other and draw revenue. Jim Crockett is an intelligent man too. He was brought into a family of promoters. His dad promoted for 50 years, but to be honest with you, my personal feelings about Jim Crockett is he's not an easy person to talk to. He's very abrupt. He's kind of even to the point of ignorant. But with Dusty, if you were to ask Dusty who is the greatest, he'd have to say Dusty. It's good to have confidence and pride in yourself. His ego, that was him. He was easy to work with, though as far as a matchmaker.

WP: It seemed at the time that you were there, he took pretty good care of you. At least as far as giving you main events matches.

WK: Yes. There is only one reason for that is because I could produce. He didn't do it because he liked me. Maybe that had something to do with it. Whenever you're in a position that he's in, he's got to look at bringing in the dollars and he definitely always saw me as that, I believe anyway.

WP: Dusty's back in power now. Do you see him leading World Championship Wrestling into prosperity or where do you see him taking them?

IK: I believe it's got the best chance right now that it's ever had since Jim Crockett sold it out to Ted Turner. At least you've got someone in control now who knows the business and has a chance of bringing it back. I think if Dusty is given free reign, he'll definitely be able to do that. Jim Crockett never seems to come out like the know-it-all type of person, but I've noticed over the years when he did have an idea, it was usually a real good idea and it was quite often. When he had input, it was creative.

WP: You were there during the formative years for Nikita Koloff and Barry Darsow. Did you think they'd be so successful when you first started working with them?

IK: Yes, I did. Of course, before I started wrestling with them, I had not met them before. That was the first time as far as Krusher is concerned as far as wrestling. I had heard of Krusher. He wrestled before. He proceeded himself. He was good so as soon as I saw him perform in the ring and wrestle, I had no doubt about it. If he was given a chance, he could do with it. Nikita, unexperienced right from the start. He had everything other than experience going for him. He sure had the look, the size. He's a heck of an athlete. He was really serious about wrestling. That's the most important thing that it takes to be successful.

WP: He had some of my all time favorite squash matches.

IK: He really had a good start to his career as far as the win record goes.

WP: He's come back now. Hopefully, it can work out for him.

IK: I wish he would come back to my school and let me finish training him. But I guess after a while ego sets in and you think you know it all. But that's not true because since I started the wrestling school in the last two years, I believe I've increased 100 percent in knowledge of wrestling. Whenever you're teaching, you have to really understand the sport, the holds, the counters, the psychology of it because it's hard to teach it if you don't.

Next Issue will feature the conclusion of our Interview With Ivan Koloff, including Uncle Ivan's thoughts about the independent wrestling scene, his wrestling school, his favorite feuds and more.

Letters To The Editors

The article on steroids in issue #24 examined a point that others seem to overlook, that an individual who loves their career will do virtually anything to stay in and succeed.

My family once was involved in stock car racing. My father spent 34 years as a driver and car owner, as did his brother and his sons. None of us made the big time, but we gained recognition for our efforts in the St. Louis area. I began racing in 1978, just as a trend of spending big money racing on the local tracks started. There were people spending \$30,000 to \$40,000 on race cars just to race at the local track on Saturday night. We tried to keep up with them, but nearly impoverished ourselves in doing so. By 1980, we just could not handle that kind of spending and dropped out of the sport. It hurt a great deal because I grew up with the sport and dreamed of racing at Indianapolis or Daytona. I would have taken money from any source or done anything to continue racing and almost did. Finally, with the number of cars dwindling at the tracks because of expense, the various promoters and sanctioning bodies began in acting special rules to keep costs down and bring more racers into the sport.

The point is that no one holds a gun to your head to spend obscene amounts of money or use drugs, but it is up to the promoters to make changes that will ensure the survival of the business. That includes wrestling.

Tim Whitehead presented a solution to "Exposing The Business On Tape" that is simple, intelligent and, most of all, honest. The irony is that once there was a promotion that presented wrestling in such a manner.

It was admitted that the television program was taped in advanced, something quite obvious when the same audience appeared three to four weeks in a row. If the recognized World Champion was to appear on the week's show but had lost the titles since the last airing, the change was announced in a special segment. The announcer broke in repeatedly on the regular commentary to remind the home audience about the title change. It was also mentioned that the new champion must accept the contracts signed by the previous title holder.

The local championship was treated in a similar manner. One could receive the arena program/newsletter by subscription, one week before the scheduled arena card. If the local title changed hands during a taping, the program/newsletter mentioned the match would air that particular weekend and gave the altered card. The promotion was also very careful about either the new or former champion appearing at the arena between taping and air dates. All of this is simple, intelligent and honest.

This promotion ran its entire operation in this manner. It covered the smallest detail and was rewarded with a loyal and knowledgeable fan base that sold out the arena repeatedly, as well as making the television show one of the highest rated on local channels (including network programming). The promoter is still held in high regard by both the local wrestling fans and the local mainstream sports community, ten years after retiring.

I rarely see Sam Muchnick's name mentioned as an example of good promoting by today's wrestling press. I suppose that is due to the fact that most newsletter editors and columnists are from areas other than St. Louis, as well as the many changes wrestling has undergone since his retirement in 1982. This is quite sad because from all I've read or heard, Sam Muchnick ran one of the classiest promotions in the business.

Michael McGowen
Jerseyville, IL

Sidelines

Thanks To Gary Langevin, Georgiann Makropoulus and Mike Sawyer for the plugs. The support is most welcome and appreciated.

Steve Beverly's Swansong The 1991 **Matwatch Annual** was recently released and is without a doubt, Beverly's finest effort. He details many inside stories from 1988 to 1991 in this 101 page annual, available for \$13 from *Matwatch*, 16 Robin Hood Lane, Jackson, TN 38305. Another annual comes from Evan Ginzburg's *Wrestling Then & Now*. The annual "History of the Territories" can be purchased for \$7 by writing to *Wrestling Then & Now*, PO Box 471, Oakland Gardens Station, Flushing, NY 11364. Ginzburg also publishes *Wrestling Then & Now* for \$1.25 an issue.

Next Issue will feature a new look, making *Wrestling Perspective* more reader friendly, if you will. Plus, part II of our interview with Ivan Koloff and the Phantom of the Ring returns with an article about the most influential promoter of the this century and no, it isn't Vince McMahon. It's an intriguing issue you don't want to miss.

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